

COLLECTION IN CONTEXT

1948

January 16–March 15, 1998

"We've got a lot—but we haven't got everything. I want what she's got. All of it. I want her house, her name, her man. And I want them now. Tonight."

Hazel Brooks to Don Ameche in Sleep, My Love, 1948

Sometimes almost silently, the United States began to break apart and reform in 1948. It was then that all sorts of energies and desires bottled up by the Second World War and by the all-pervasive postwar campaign for rationalized production, controlled consumption, and female domesticity—a campaign shaped both by official government policy and by unprecedented commercial advertising—took off, and in all sorts of ways. Bebop emerged from secret jam sessions and into public nightclubs, insisting on the apparently irrational, on the anarchistic, on truths that could only be told in a new language—on a new shape for freedom. Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and just a few more first began to think of themselves with a sense of their historical role as a generation, or as a conspiracy of letters and morals—to imagine insanely that the country might someday turn its face toward theirs, or that, already, the world turned around them. Film noir—with its most iconic theme, that of the war veteran returning to his hometown only to find it a sink of corruption—reached perhaps the highest pitch of its argument that in America darkness vanquished light, betrayal trumped loyalty, greed erased compassion: that life was a trap. On the radio, the whole of the previous year had been dominated by a single song, "Open the Door, Richard!," a continuing Top-10 hit seven times over, for Count Basie, for Jo Stafford, and on, and on, the catchy, stilted, raceless, oppressive beat driving all other sounds before it. Yet as the year turned, a young white woman and five young black men came together in the segregated city of Baltimore to form the Orioles and create modern rhythm and blues; in their hands a nearly abstract music that in its affirmation of defeated passion would over the next decade lead to the worldwide transformation of popular music through rock and roll. As if to tell the same story backwards, the Democratic Party met in Philadelphia for its national convention, where Hubert Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis, offered the first civil rights plank in the party's history. In response to its passage, much of the Deep South walked out of the hall in protest. In November, Strom Thurmond, the presidential candidate of the "States Rights Democrats"—Strom Thurmond, then governor of South

Carolina and today, unlike almost all of those who fought with or against him then, still a determining figure in our national life, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, committed as firmly to the exclusion of homosexuals from the military as he was to the exclusion of black Americans from the ballot box in 1948—entered the electoral college with huge majorities from the whites-only voting populations of South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. It was an event that set the stage for the venal, heroic, murderous, transporting racial clashes that over the next two decades would transform the country and its contract with itself.

The question asked now in this room is whether the painting and sculpture of 1948, as represented by the best of the Museum's Permanent Collection, take part in this spirit of flux, doubt, disruption, opportunity, conflict, terror, refusal, and escape—or does the legitimate art of the time deflect that spirit, evade it, turn away? One can see, hear, feel a breach opening up in America's explanation of itself to itself in Anthony Mann's archetypically generic no-way-out film noir *Raw Deal*, swift, cruel, and draped in the Gothic cinematography of John Alton; in the Orioles' unearthly reply to the endless versions of "Open the Door, Richard!" with Deborah Chessler's "It's Too Soon to Know"; in the few seconds of "A Mad Gleam," with Allen Ginsberg chanting as if through the static of official culture ("Go back, go back to the legends...the unheard music") while in the background the radio picked up New York's Symphony Sid spinning bebop discs (in 1949, but it was January, so we'll cheat); in footage of the 1948 Democratic National Convention. Is anything similar at work in Edward Hopper's queerly final *Seven A.M.* ("...what we might/ Expect to make of shop-window shelf/ Displaying last year's style of dark and light?" John Hollander wrote of the painting in 1960), in Lee Krasner's cool but tentative *White Squares*, or Isabel Bishop's *Double Date Delayed*, or Adolph Gottlieb's *Vigil*? In Thomas Hart Benton's glamorous near-poster for the original production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (it hung in the lobby of the Barrymore Theatre) or Isamu Noguchi's stark *The Ring*, at once ultra-modern and primeval? German émigré George Grosz's no-hope *Waving the Flag* answers yes to Mann, Ginsberg, the Orioles, but even though he had changed the spelling of his first name to Americanize it as far back as the teens, the old Dada-Communist was never at home here, so we can write him off as a foreigner.

The question is whether the two cultures in this room are two cultures; if they are speaking the same language, or if one is translating that of the other. And it's a question for the visitor to take up, if she or he finds it makes sense; the curator is just asking.

"I'm tired of having all the answers."
Joan Bennett in Hollow Triumph, 1948

—Greil Marcus

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION*

Unless otherwise noted, dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters; height precedes width precedes depth.

Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975)

POKER NIGHT (FROM A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE), 1948

Tempera and oil on panel, 36 x 48 (91.4 x 121.9)
Mrs. Percy Uris Bequest 85.49.2

Isabel Bishop (1902-1988)

DOUBLE DATE DELAYED, 1948

Etching: sheet, 10 x 6 3/4 (25.4 x 17.1);
plate, 5 x 3 1/2 (12.7 x 8.9)
Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.117

Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993)

UNTITLED, 1948

Offset lithograph mounted on paper: mount,
12 11/16 x 10 1/8 (32.2 x 25.7); image
10 x 8 1/2 (25.4 x 21.6)
Purchase, with funds from the
Print Committee 93.40.1

UNTITLED, 1948

Offset lithograph mounted on paper: mount,
12 11/16 x 10 1/8 (32.2 x 25.7); image,
10 15/16 x 8 1/2 (27.8 x 21.6)
Purchase, with funds from the
Print Committee 93.40.2

UNTITLED, 1948

Offset lithograph mounted on paper: mount,
12 11/16 x 10 1/8 (32.2 x 25.7); image
11 x 8 1/2 (27.9 x 21.6)
Purchase, with funds from the
Print Committee 93.40.3

Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974)

VIGIL, 1948

Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 (91.4 x 121.9)
Purchase 49.2

George Grosz (1893-1959)

WAVING THE FLAG, 1947-48

Watercolor on paper, 25 x 18 (63.5 x 45.7) sight
Purchase and exchange 54.9

Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

SEVEN A.M., 1948

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 (76.2 x 101.6)
Purchase and exchange 50.8

Lee Krasner (1908-1984)

WHITE SQUARES, c. 1948

Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 (61 x 76.2)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. B.H. Friedman 75.1

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988)

THE RING, 1945-48

Granite, 12 x 22 x 22 (30.5 x 55.9 x 55.9)
Gift of the artist 69.106

Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967)

NUMBER 18—1948-49, 1948-49

Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 (101.6 x 152.4)
Purchase 53.13

Yves Tanguy (1900-1955)

FEAR, 1949

Oil on canvas, 60 x 40 (152.4 x 101.6)
Purchase 49.21

AUDIO, FILM, AND VIDEOTAPES

"OPEN THE DOOR, RICHARD!," 1947

Music by Jack McVea and Dan Howell
Words by "Dusty" Fletcher and John Mason
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All rights administered by MCA MUSIC
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Musicians.

Version one. Performed by Count Basie and His
Orchestra 1947
©1980 RCA Records

Version two: Performed by The Three Flames,
1948
Courtesy of Harmony, a division of Columbia
Records Inc.

"IT'S TOO SOON TO KNOW," 1948

Music by Deborah Chessler
Performed by the Orioles (Sonny Til, lead tenor;
George Nelson, baritone; Johnny Reed, bass;
Alexander Sharp, high tenor; Tommy Gaither,
guitar)
Courtesy of Rhino Records
By arrangement with Warner Special Products
With permission from Edwin H. Morris &
Company, a division of MPL Communications, Inc.

AUDIO, FILM, AND VIDEOTAPES (CONTINUED)

"A MAD GLEAM"

Allen Ginsberg

Recorded January 1949 in New York City by John Clellon Holmes; first released on *Allen Ginsberg, Holy Soul Jelly Roll: Poems and Songs 1949-1993* (Rhino Word Beat, 1994)

©1983 by Allen Ginsberg, used with the permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.
By arrangement with the Allen Ginsberg Trust
c/o Len Freedman Music

Universal-International Newsreel

DEMOCRATS: CONVENTION OPENS TO CHOOSE 1948 TICKET, 1948

16mm film, black-and-white, sound, excerpt from
4-minute original
Courtesy of The National Archives, College Park,
Maryland

Paramount News (newsreel)

CRUCIAL TEST CONFRONTS

DEMOCRATS!, 1948

16mm film, black-and-white, sound,
9 minutes
Footage provided by Grinberg Library,
New York

Universal-International Newsreel

DEMOCRATS: GOV. THURMOND HEADS STATE RIGHTS SLATE, 1948

16mm film, black-and-white, sound;
2 minutes
Courtesy of The National Archives, College Park,
Maryland

Unidentified newsreel

[HARRY S. TRUMAN'S POST-ELECTION SUMMARY], 1948

16mm film, black-and-white, sound,
2-minute excerpt
Footage provided by Film/Audio Services,
New York

Dave Coleman

A PASSION FOR JUSTICE...THE 1948 CIVIL RIGHTS SPEECH, 1989

Video, black-and-white and color, sound;
13 minutes
Courtesy of The Humphrey Forum,
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Anthony Mann

RAW DEAL, 1948

Black-and-white, sound; 79 minutes
With Dennis O'Keefe, Claire Trevor, Marsha
Hunt, Raymond Burr, and John Ireland
Courtesy of Golden Books Family
Entertainment

*as of January 13, 1998

The exhibition has been curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Greil Marcus.

Jon Gartenberg assisted with the choice of film noir for the exhibition.

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